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Diversity reflection: an approach towards provoking diverse thinking within social work and social pedagogy training

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Abstract

Teaching diversity in social pedagogy and social work training is vital for promoting inclusivity, cultural competence, empathy and effective practice. It supports students in their personal development and equips them to navigate today's interconnected world. Inspired by bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, this article describes diversity reflection – an approach that invites students' and teachers' diverse thinking – and how it can be implemented in preparation for and delivery of diversity training for future social pedagogues and social workers. The article also explores why it is important to embrace diversity as an aspect in professional reflection. It outlines how such reflection should take place on a micro, mezzo and macro level. Finally, it introduces further aspects of teaching diversity, including the need for lecturers to

exercise professional and personal reflection and how the teacher's diversity influences preparation and delivery of diversity training.

Keywords bell hooks; transgression; diversity training; diversity-reflexivity; teaching diversity; social pedagogy

Introduction

Teaching diversity for social pedagogy and social work students requires teachers to reflect continually on their actions before, after and during the course. The reflective process therefore specifically includes diversity to enable the teacher to take on perspectives influenced and led by diversity and experience present in the classroom, including their own. I call this process diversity reflection.

In this article I explore diversity reflection as an approach based on bell hooks's (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Teaching should be an exchange between students and teacher, not a one-way transmission of knowledge. hooks sees this as a transformative process that empowers students to become critical thinkers and contribute a major part of their own learning. Her work is influenced by Paulo Freire, who describes the teacher as a facilitator, asking students questions with the intention of encouraging students to start asking questions of themselves and of other students (Shor, 1992). This initiates the process of critical thinking within the classroom. Social pedagogues and social workers aim to empower people, particularly those who experience oppression in their everyday lives. It is essential that students learn techniques to listen to their clients' stories of lived experience. Simultaneously, students should be aware of how they position themselves within the context of the oppressed and how they experience the world themselves.

Diversity reflection, as described in this article, uses the above-mentioned ideas and discusses how lecturers could (and should) be guided by their students when introducing this approach into their classrooms. It is each individual's understanding and experience of differences and diversity that contributes to the overall personal and professional development of all students. This lived experience in the classroom shapes their individual professional *Haltung* regarding diversity – the term *Haltung* is a German concept understood to mean 'mindset or ethos' and our stance towards the world around us.

The implementation of diversity reflection provokes co-creativity and critical thinking. It also brings real-life experience in the classroom. This requires teachers to insert themselves into the learning environment of their students, to allow them to be seen as learners.

Personal narratives on teaching and diversity

Teaching diversity requires a high level of reflective skills from lecturers and teachers. Too often diversity is taught in textbook style, which removes both teacher and student from the subject and fails to include diversity in the classroom. Instead of the class looking at or considering the subject of diversity, they need to be in discussion about diversity. Just like experiencing the theatre, one may be a passive observer watching the play, or an actor engaging with it on the stage. To promote active engagement where students and teachers participate and work together, helpful tools are needed that invite them to look at each individual's thinking and positioning within the context of diversity.

I wondered how I could write an article postulating an academic standard while simultaneously including my own personality and experience in teaching diversity within a social pedagogy training context. It felt challenging, as including the 'self' of the author in a publication seems to be rather uncommon. While working on this article, bell hooks's work supported my approach and the dilemma that it presented on how to be scientific while simultaneously introducing personal experience. hooks (1994) has stated that some professors do not acknowledge a lecturer's standing as a lecturer if 'progressive pedagogy' is introduced into the classroom, creating space for students and teacher 'to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know' (p. 148). It is not a given that this approach will necessarily make a difference to the readers of this article, but it does make a difference to me, sharing my experience on diversity and my (often internal) struggles when talking about teaching future social pedagogues. It

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also allows readers to understand my context: a white, older male, who was educated and socialised in Europe, with a privileged upbringing, and who experienced discrimination because of his sexual orientation. At the risk of breaking traditional academic etiquette, I will therefore transgress and write this article from both a personal and an academic perspective.

Over the past 15 years I have taught social pedagogy and social work programmes at different universities. I began teaching a course called 'International Social Work'. It felt important for students to become aware that practising within a local context happens within a wider global context. Social workers and social pedagogues should be aware of the links between issues arising within their local practice on account of events taking place on an international level and understanding the impact that local policies may have internationally (Healy and Thomas, 2021). After some years, I changed the course content and renamed it 'Intercultural Social Work'. The intention was to shift the perspective. Students should view social work within the international context, but they should also focus, within their local context, on practice with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

It was during the first year of my own systemic family-therapy training that I came across John Burnham (1993) and the concept of social graces. I started to understand that practitioners, including myself, are more comfortable exploring certain 'issues of social differences' between themselves and their clients but less willing to look at issues that would force them to step out of their comfort zone. 'A negative personal experience or a non-conformity with their own belief system might be a reason for it' (Burnham et al., 2008, p. 529). I began including concepts of social graces in my course and changed the title to 'Social Pedagogy within a Diverse Context', assuming that practice always occurs in a space of differences. Students need to look at their own understandings and create a *Haltung* that acknowledges and accommodates social differences. This will allow them to understand the impact that discrimination has on their client's life and to treat them with respect. bell hooks (1994) has taken the idea of self-exploration further, to a space in the classroom where students are encouraged to share their own experiences: 'When one speaks from the perspective of one's immediate experience, something's created in the classroom for students, sometimes for the first time. Focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge space from which they can speak' (p. 148). This changes the setting of teaching as students become the experts of their own experiences and, therefore, of the specific issues that they raised. However, students should not be seen and used as 'native informants' (hooks, 1994, p. 44), taking on the role of an expert and adviser to the teacher and the classroom. It is also my experience that this can perpetuate existing power imbalances within the classroom and place students in a position where they are expected to share personal or community experiences for the educational benefit of others, potentially without considering the emotional or psychological impact on the student. Furthermore, it could limit the students' own learning experience, while placing an unfair burden on students from marginalised or minority backgrounds to educate their peers and even their teachers about their culture or experiences.

bell hooks (1994) has also stressed the importance of 'critical awareness and engagement' (p. 14) rather than that of absorbing information. There is a need for creating possibilities in the classroom and hooks (1994) calls for 'the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress' (p. 206).

The need to teach diversity

Social pedagogy and social work have the expectation of advocating for social justice and equality and maintaining non-discriminatory practice. This is, for example, reflected in the *BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work* (British Association of Social Work, 2021) and in the Global Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). For social pedagogy, it can be found in the *Charter for Social Pedagogy in the UK and Ireland* (Social Pedagogy Professional Association, 2022). As xenophobia intensifies worldwide (United Nations, 2016) and tolerance for right-wing extremism and racism increases (European Agency of Fundamental Rights, 2020), social pedagogy and social work training institutions face ongoing responsibilities to address these issues. This is not only equipping students with tools and strategies to advocate for clients but also guiding them towards a space of self-assessment and exploration of their own experience and world views, where discrimination is the day-to-day lived experience of service users, as well as of many practitioners. The dilemma of countering

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forms of oppression, injustice and discrimination on the one hand, and having to deal with their own stereotypes and prejudice on the other, could mean social workers and social pedagogues feel shame and guilt that could potentially lead to an avoidance of critical reflection (Beck, 2015). Consequently, teachers are required to create a learning environment informed by the recognition of, and exposure to, diversity. Students and teachers must therefore work continuously on themselves as well as with others, they need space within and outside university buildings to learn from, reflect on and have their stance on diversity disturbed.

bell hooks has called for students to be guided on their path, encouraged to become aware of the reality surrounding them and supported as they step into the zone of uncertainty that permits possibilities for change. Such possibilities encompass change within the perception of oneself and other people, as well as in terms of implementing learning outside school to bring this experience back into school for further exploration and reflection. As Paulo Freire (1972) describes, 'Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence: critical thinking through which men discover each other to be "in a situation"' (p. 81).

To labour for freedom in the context of diversity could be understood as the willingness to look at one's own perspective on diversity. This will lead to reflective practice, where social pedagogues can become aware of their own prejudices and biases. Consequently, this contributes to the freedom of those of their clients who are subject to injustice and discrimination. Implementing reflective processes is essential for social pedagogy and social work training.

Reflection processes in social pedagogy training

It has been widely recognised that reflective practice contributes to developing the capability to 'engage in complex decision making and effective practice' (Wilson, 2013, p. 154). Reflective practitioners are more conscious of their professional role, of themselves within that professional role and of the 'assumptions underlying their practice' (Sheppard et al., 2000, p. 129).

While reflective practice is understood as a concept that is implemented more in social work than in other social care professions (Ferguson, 2018, p. 415), it is necessary to acknowledge that social pedagogic practice also requires a high level of reflective capabilities. This is evidenced in the *Standards of Proficiency in Social Pedagogy* and the *Standards for Education and Training* set out by the Social Pedagogy Professional Association (n.d.). Hence, there is a clear mandate for training institutions to include reflective processes and practice in their curricula.

Schön (1987) argues that through self-assessment and critical analysis reflective practitioners gain the ability to create self-awareness and, consequently, the know-how to reflect and operate within a professional context. He distinguishes between reflection in practice – the ability to prompt reflection in the moment of practising – and reflection on practice – an activity taking place before or after professional engagement. By adopting a reflective outlook, practitioners are more equipped to react to day-to-day practice tasks, to identify how each might be distinguished by its unique characteristics and contexts and, therefore, to accomplish more informed decision making (Wilson, 2013, p. 156). Moreover, Schön (1991, cited in Cleary, 2020) has stated that '"reflection in practice" is akin to "artistry" in that it requires intuition, sensitivity, creativity and a sense of judgement' (p. 8); attributes that are also reflected in the *Standards of Proficiency in Social Pedagogy*. Reflective practice takes place within the inner self; it must necessarily involve the personal experience of a practitioner. Furthermore, social pedagogues must understand how their individual *Haltung* in a unique work context affects their professional action and decision making.

Cleary (2020) has spoken about ethical reflection in social pedagogy. The central point being the relationship between practitioner and service users, and between that of the profession and society. It is informed by philosophical ethics, everyday ethics and professional ethics. Cleary (2020) has stated that 'social pedagogical practices are geared to working with social justice and therefore require that practitioners draw on reflections concerning the nature of goodness, meaning and responsibility' (p. 8). In summary, it can be agreed that reflection is a core competence of social pedagogues and social workers, implying that they should be able to implement reflective practice in their day-to-day work. Reflection on practice must go hand in hand with reflection in practice. The relationship between practitioners and society is an essential part of reflection. Practitioners should therefore be aware that we represent a system that is in part determined by injustice, institutional racism and discrimination.

hooks (1994) has also referred to this as 'domestic colonization' (p. 46). Consequently, work towards the abolition of injustice included 'domestic decolonization'.

Decolonisation is understood as 'challenging coloniality as a global historical and contemporary fact' (Moosa-Mitha, 2022, p. 27). This is based on an awareness that even though independence from colonising countries from the Global North was achieved, the 'colonial logic of governance and intercultural relations continues to characterise societies from the Global South' (Moosa-Mitha, 2022, p. 27). In a domestic context, we need to look at the (perceived) power of practitioners over clients. The awareness that social workers and social pedagogues hold such power allows them to reflect on the impact that it might have on their relationship with their clients. Even though practitioners are aware of institutional racism within the social care sector (Marson, 2022), they need to understand the level of injustice and oppression that is happening and that they are partly representatives of the oppressors, depending on the context that they are working in. If my employer is a Catholic charity, my clients might see me as a social pedagogue, but they might also see me linked to an institution – in this example, the Catholic Church – that continues to deal with allegations of child abuse. This also applies to practitioners who come from marginalised groups and have experienced oppression and discrimination themselves. I am hopeful that social workers and social pedagogues aim to apply 'solidarity, mutuality, interdependence and equality, values that underpin anti-oppressive social work practice' (Dominelli, 2012, p. 166). Consequently, it is important to understand one's role and position within the context of oppression and institutionalised discrimination and racism, and to contribute towards domestic decolonisation.

Critical diversity reflection

Hannah von Gröhnheim and Jelena Seeberg (2022) introduced the concept of critical diversity reflection for social work adding to the personal (own or other's) reflection (micro level), in an organisational (mezzo level) and societal or governmental (macro level) context. They reflect that because of the societal power of service delivery, social work and social pedagogy potentially patronise and discriminate against their clients. Professionals, through their privileged position, contribute, consciously or unconsciously, to exclusion. Simultaneously, social workers, and equally social pedagogues, may experience discrimination themselves. Besides primary discrimination, practitioners could be subject to a secondary level of discrimination, caused by their advocating for the rights of their clients (von Grönheim and Seeberg, 2022).

Anti-oppressive practice, a social justice-oriented model, has been established in recent decades. Oppression 'is seen as a social construction to create a categorical organisation of people and groups within societies' (Amadasun and Omorogiuwa, 2020, p. 199), which is positioned within the concept of intersectionality. 'Contrary to articulating gender, race, and class as distinct social categories, intersectionality postulates that these systems of oppression are mutually constituted and work together to produce inequality' (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012, p. 2100). Discrimination takes place within certain categories, and the level of discrimination differs. A white person in a wheelchair might experience discrimination because of their disability, while a Black[1] person in a wheelchair could experience discrimination and racism simultaneously. Hence, social pedagogues and social workers must develop an analytical view on the apparent reason for, and context of, discrimination. This could be achieved through reflection, but should be extended to analysing continuously the impact of the practitioner's own social identity, their values and how they might be perceived by others (von Grönheim and Seeberg, 2022, p. 111). Discrimination does not occur in isolation. The setting where and how discrimination is displayed is influenced by societal, political and cultural context. Therefore, critical reflective diversity requires analysis on micro, mezzo and macro levels. Accordingly, supporting and empowering our clients could also take place on different levels.

Von Grönheim and Seeberg suggest questions for a reflective analysis, as with the following example: a social pedagogue accompanies a young woman from Syria to apply for social housing, who then experiences discrimination from an officer. Exploring events on a micro level, the social pedagogue could ask themselves what power structures are in place between the young person and the person who discriminates? What experience of oppression has the young person or the professional experienced before that might be displayed in this situation? What privileges might be presumed relevant and available for the professional and the officer? On a mezzo level, questions could be

about the organisation that the officer is working for. How diverse is the organisation? Are there any institutionalised structures in place that contribute to discrimination and the experience of the young person? Is there easy access to interpreters? The macro-level questions could include how the category of the young person is constructed in media, law, policy and within society, and could contribute to the officer's own values. Critical diversity reflection, as an addition to existing reflective approaches, stresses the importance of understanding the process, how discrimination takes place on various levels, and how these situations are viewed differently by social pedagogues, based on their own experience and values and is an important contribution to diversity reflection, as I have described it.

Thoughts on preparing and delivering lectures on diversity

bell hooks (1994) has stated that her 'pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical and feminist pedagogies' (p. 10). This mixture of approaches and perspectives grounded her as a professional lecturer and enabled her to stretch boundaries. It allowed her to 'challenge biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students' (hooks, 1994, p. 10). Similarly, lecturers must educate themselves on racism, anti-racist practice, de-colonisation and anti-oppressive practice. They must challenge themselves to understand the context (historical, societal and global) within which the discrimination is taking place, to get into a position where they can expand beyond boundaries to create a learning environment that is real: bringing in reality through their own knowledge and experience, as well as that of their students.

As a starting point, teachers should participate in discourses 'to cross boundaries, [and] the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences' (hooks, 1994, p. 130). This minimises the risk of finding yourself in an echo chamber where no new perspectives are introduced. bell hooks (1994) has given a beautiful example of such discourse in *Teaching to Transgress*, where she talks to Ron Scapp, a philosopher, whom she describes as a colleague and a friend:

> 'I wanted to include this dialogue because we inhabit different locations. Even though Ron is white and male (two locations that bestow specific powers and privileges), I have taught primarily at private institutions (deemed more prestigious than the state institutions where we both now teach) and have a higher rank and more prestige. We both come from working-class backgrounds. His roots are in the city, mine in rural America.' (p. 132)

Having cross-boundary conversations includes reflection on the context in which the discourse is taking place, the privileges that the participants have or those that they have been denied, as well as any similarities and differences between participants. Such boundaries contribute to an increased awareness of each other's positioning and reasoning within the discourse.

Having productive cross-boundary conversations includes reflection on the context in which the discourse is taking place, the privileges that participants have or those that they have been denied, as well as any similarities and differences between participants. It also contributes to an increased awareness of each other's positioning and reasoning within the discourse.

These areas also apply to lesson preparation and the reflection needed regarding the students who will be present in the classroom: understanding who the students are, their level of knowledge, age group and so on, will support the preparation and delivery of the course. 'Factors to consider include the multiple social identities, interests, expectations, needs, prior experiences, lived realities' (Bell and Goodman, 2023, p. 61), which will support creating the syllabus and content of a course, and a more inclusive learning environment. For example, teaching on issues concerning the LGBTQ+ community should incorporate an intersectional perspective with regard to social class, race, age, among others. The reading material required should include diverse LGBTQ+ authors and demonstrate the strength and resilience of that community instead of presenting only their vulnerability. 'We should always avoid content that presents people from disadvantaged groups in tokenized, stereotypical ways and should seek materials that reflect the diversity of experiences within a social identity group' (hooks, 1994, p. 10).

When I use an exercise in a lesson on ageism, exploring how old people are seen within our society, students often create posters full of stereotypes about this group of people. During group reflection at the end of the day, a student once pointed out that they felt uncomfortable seeing all these negative

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comments about older people displayed in the classroom. I had not been aware of the negative impact that this exercise had and how it might contribute to discrimination against older people. There was no need to bring stereotypes into the classroom. This example demonstrates how easily teachers can step into a space where they repeat negative ideas – in their daily lives or, as I allowed it to happen, in the classroom. I no longer use these types of exercise. Instead, I now have conversations with students about the use of stereotypes at the beginning of a course.

This personal account demonstrates that I was given the opportunity to learn, to become aware of something that I wasn't aware of before the incident. The difference with this kind of learning, compared to many other situations where lecturers generate knowledge while teaching, is that it happens in a transparent way. Students were able to observe me learning, in the teaching process, and this changed my position towards them.

bell hooks (1994) has spoken about becoming a learner herself when setting foot in the lecture room. She describes that for a short time, she and the class become a 'community of learners together' (p. 153). Mindful that her position changes when she enters the learning community, she stated: 'And I am not saying that we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context' (hooks, 1994, p. 153). The boundaries, the set positions and power structures are suddenly challenged and hooks transgresses educational normativity, taking her students on a journey with her. The same process is also brought about in critical diversity reflection, when students and teachers undertake an analysis jointly.

Another aspect of teaching introduced by bell hooks is the lecturer's body and how it is included in the teaching process. She supposes that a reason why students experience teachers as people who don't work may be linked to the relatively immobile posture of a lecturer's body. hooks is of the view that standing behind a desk and not moving around influences teaching and how lecturers are perceived by the class. 'Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits' (hooks, 1994, p. 138). It removes an invisible wall between lecturer and class that demonstrates a power that is not helpful in the process of teaching. Students will also hear teachers differently when words are not spoken from behind this invisible demarcation line. By moving through the classroom, invading the whole space, walking around, inviting direct eye contact with students, a different connection between students and lecturer is established. The class will also get an idea of how the teacher is making sense of them, their contributions and the progress of their learning. Teachers achieve visibility through moving their bodies away from their desk right into the area where the actual learning is taking place. It may also remove the 'notion of professors as omnipotent, all-knowing mind' (hooks, 1994, p. 10).

In my experience, it makes a difference when I am walking around the room during teaching; I can include everyone more easily, I can see more of those sitting at the back and include them. Students contributing from the front row are heard by those at the back as they turn towards me in the middle of the room. Simultaneously, I am aware of the risk of potentially 'invading' the students' space, which might result in a reaction contradictory to the expected impact on moving around in the classroom. I must always balance how I position myself physically to be closer to students while respecting their own (private) space in the classroom.

A certain level of vulnerability on display – from the lecturer as well as the students – is an important aspect of such practice, because 'when we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks' (hooks, 2010, p. 21). This is part of what hooks has described as engaged pedagogy.

The moment I am more visible in the room I begin to wonder how I am being perceived by others: How will female students perceive me as a male teacher? How will students react to my perceived sexual orientation? What is the view of Black students who have a white lecturer teaching this course? How might all this impact on our learning environment? Am I good and experienced enough to stand in front of a class and teach?

Within a reflective process, I query my views and values with regard to my students: How do I perceive them? What are my attitudes towards certain students in my class? What impact does my behaviour, intended or unintended, have on them and the overall learning experience for all students?

Such questions form an important part of the process of teaching diversity because teachers' unique background, socialisation and experience determine what kind of persona they present in the teaching setting. It is important to consider 'how we are situated in the classroom and broader society, using the lenses of social identities, positionalities, and related privileges and disadvantages'

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(Bell and Goodman, 2023, p. 409). These components, among others, 'play a significant and complex role in shaping our sense of self and our experiences and responses in workshops and classrooms' (hooks, 1994, p. 10).

How does the fact that I am white, gay and male determine the content I choose to teach and the literature I use? Who might feel empowered and who might feel excluded in the classroom? This again demonstrates how important, and sometimes risky, it is to include my individuality in the context of teaching on diversity.

Conclusion

Diversity reflection is a process that starts with the preparation of a course: Why am I choosing certain papers to be included in the lesson? How diverse is the content of my diversity course? How is the preparation influenced or informed by my identity and who might I exclude by running the course the way I intend to do?

This reflective process needs to continue throughout the lecture, the marking process and the course review. Diversity reflection calls for transgressing known and comfortable structures of teaching as each individual – teacher or student – is the point of focus. It requires displaying vulnerability as the teacher's physical and social positioning changes within the classroom setting (teachers as learners). This, in turn, results in a shift of the power structure between lecturer and the class, towards a place where sharing thoughts, ideas and experience is both invited and more possible. It also demands the creation of a safe space, where no one will be judged, and all are invited to ask questions.

The experience that bell hooks has shared in her book about her own journey in becoming a professor, her many years in the classroom and how she had to learn to transgress as well as to teach her students to transgress is inspiring and invaluable in helping to find one's own *Haltung* as a teacher as well as a human being. Teachers must always remember and continually remind themselves and their students not to forget the context that determined hooks' journey and the extent to which it relates to their own. She was a Black woman who started school at the time of segregation in the USA. She was a feminist who fought continually for equal rights, and an intellectual who had to wrestle to be acknowledged as such.

Note

[1] I have capitalised 'Black' to point out the difference between a culture and a colour: 'white' does not represent a shared culture in the way that 'Black' does, and it has been 'capitalised by hate groups' (Coleman, 2020).

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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